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AUTHOR Versluis, Edward B.
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ABSTRACT

Three arguments lead to the conclusion that the English of business is the business of English. First, reluctance to fully appreciate the English of Business stems in part from a serious misunderstanding about the development of written language in the Western tradition. While studying folktales and the origins of myths has made an awareness of "oral literacy" common in our profession, what do most people know about the origins of writing? Even at the height of the great Myceneaen culture of the second millennium B.C., the age of Homer's heroes, the only writing in use on the Greek mainland was solely for recordkeeping. Another argument stems from answering the question of what is the English of Business. The answer can be traced to the matter-of-fact Latin texts of two engineers in Augustus' empire, Frontinus and Vitruvius. Frontinus wrote about the flow of water, the spigots, in the loving details that could be expected from a man devoted to plumbing and civil service. Vitruvius' work is just as detailed about the business of constructing Greek style temples. He is matter-of-fact, lucid, and influential. These examples suggest that instead of being relegated to the realm of hastily scribbled notes, commercial, technical, and artistic concerns all elicited the mature genius of the classical Greeks, Imperial Romans, and Renaissance Europeans. The third argument flows from an overlooked fact: English is the world's language of choice. There are more people using English as a second language than as a native language. English has risen in prominence, not only through Shakespeare's plays and the King James Bible but also through England's participation in many foreign wars. Today, respect for various discourse communities, including scientific, technical, and business communities, exists, as do subtle differences in the writing process and the sense of audience. (Contains 27 references.) (TB)

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By Edward B. Versluis
Department of English
Southern Oregon State College
Ashland, OR 97520

There are three arguments that lead to the conclusion that the English of business is the business of English.

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First, reluctance to fully appreciate the English of Business stems in part from a serious misunderstanding about the development of written language in the Western tradition. While studying folk-tales and the origins of myths has made an awareness of "oral literacy" common in our profession, what do most of us know about the origins of writing? At every turn we urge our students to write to express themselves, even to "write to learn," as if writing were simply a natural human activity. Well, it isn't.

For most of the history of the human race, our finest thoughts in poetry, philosophy, religion, history, or even gossip were unlettered. Our ancestors, unlike the lillies of the field, sowed and they reaped, but they didn't--until comparatively recently--write. You might well expect that any culture fortunate enough to have developed some form of writing would soon be covering the surfaces of its stone, clay, or papyrus with a substantial amount of what concerned its citizens most deeply. Religion, romance, story telling; are not these the very heart of any culture whose people reflect upon the ways of the world? In fact, with variations that is exactly what happened in the texts produced in the early characters of China, the early Sanskrit script of India, and the early hieroglyphics of

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Egypt (Lai Ming 1; Gaur 80; Allchin 306; Dimock 3). But research into the Mesopotamian origins of cuneiform writing (about 3400 B.C.) has by now clearly established that these earliest known examples of what we would loosely call writing were records, inventories of sheep and grain (Walker 21; Sampson 47).

In fact, even at the height of the great Myceneaen Culture of the second millenium B.C., the age of the War at Troy and all the originals for Homer's heroes, Linear B (at its peak in 1500 B.C.), the only form of writing then in use on the Greek mainland, was used solely to keep records. Restricted to sites of royal power, such as Mycenae, Tyrens, and Pylos, written on unbaked clay tablets, which apparently were intended only as temporary records, Linear B dealt exclusively with inventories and the logistics of production and defense. There is a fragile link to Homer, of course. Among the 2 thousand clay records preserved at Pylos (by the fire that consumed the palace) is an occasional reference to a leader named NETEUS. Translated into later Classical Greek, that name would read as "Neleus," the name of King Nestor's father (Thomas and Wick 58).

Several hundred years after the fire at Pylos, written Classical Greek gave us the epics, the plays, the glory of Greek thought. But in the earlier Bronze Age depicted in those epics and plays, remember, writing recorded mostly lists of slaves and sheep.

Without claiming a perfect view of the archaeological record (or even unanimity among archaeologists reviewing that record), we can note a remarkably long stretch from 3400 B.C in Sumer to 1100 B.C. in Greece where economic needs predominated over personal needs in the written record. And without presuming to understand all the reasons for that predominance, we can clearly detect a human preference for using the written word in ways then which may not reflect our academic preferences today.

The conclusion this line of argument leads to is that, at the beginning of the tradition extending from Sumer down through Greece, writing was an artifice that devalued memory even as it extended the reach of memory in the management of an essentially economic reality. Some time later this artifice was appropriated to explore our thoughts and to create hypothetical realities. So, recording inventories, exploring, and creating in writing all essentially depend upon an artifice whose relation to subjects and purposes is arbitrarily determined.

A second argument stems from answering the question, what <u>is</u> the English of Business? It is all too easy to see the potential for the abuse of language in the quest for wealth. In fact, the discussion of the good and bad uses of language goes back to Aristotle's <u>Rhetoric</u>. The English of Business, as a cluster of skills or abilities, shares a great deal with Rhetoric. Remember Aristotle's warning about the misuse of the "rhetorical faculty."

> If it is urged that an abuse of the rhetorical faculty can work great mischief, the same charge can be brought against all good things (save virtue itself), and especially against the most useful things such as strength, health, wealth, and military skill. Rightly employed, they work the greatest blessings; and wrongly employed, they work the utmost harm (6).

Aristotle even discusses Exports and Imports (just before Happiness and Goodness) as subjects of deliberation (22-23). The Greeks were, like ourselves, great international traders.

There is further evidence of the application of Classical Greek rhetorical principles to business in the life of

Demosthenes, Aristotle's contemporary. At age 18, Demosthenes' first case was to take his former guardians to court for embezzeling his inheritance. He won the case if not the money (Pearson 8; Plutarch 5; Pickard-Cambridge 7). Although Demosthenes is justly famous for his impassioned defense of Athenian democracy against the Macedonian tyranny of Philip, his professional practice while part of that democracy was single-minded. "Birth," says one authority, "was not important to him . . . but money was"(Kennedy 31).

The actual practice of what the English of Business does can be traced to the matter-of-fact Latin texts of two engineers in Augustus' Empire, Frontinus and Vitruvius. Frontinus' The Aqueducts of Rome proudly follows the flow of water, the spiggots, in fact all the loving details you would expect from a man dedicated to the business of plumbing and civil service. Vitruvius' The Ten Books On Architecture is just as detailed about the business of constructing Greek style temples. Vitruvius is matter-of-fact, lucid, and influential. After all, the famous 1490 da Vinci drawing of a man inscribed within a circle and a square is an illustration for a Renaissance edition of Vitruvius's work. That's why da Vinci's drawing is called "The Vitruvian Man." An even later work on engineering, still in Latin, Georgius Agricola's 1556 De Re Metallica, an illustrated survey of everything you'd ever want to know about the evolving field of mining, sought to advance mining technology, one of the hotest business enterprises of the 16th century.

These examples, while few and widely scattered, nonetheless suggest that, instead of being relegated to the realm of hastily scribbled notes, commercial, technical, and artistic concerns all elicited the mature genius of the Classical Greeks, Imperial Romans, and Renaissance

Europeans. They also suggest the conclusion that the Language of Business is as at home in the written record of those people as is any belletristic use of language.

The last line of argument for the importance of the study of the English of Business flows from an overlooked, but imposing fact standing squarely before us. Today, for a while at least, English is the world's language of choice. In fact, there are more people today using English as a Second Language than there are native English speakers. This extraordinary spread of the language has spurred the growth of new field, the study of 'World Englishes (Allen 1)." And most of the people using World Englishes are using them to conduct business (Newman 1).

There is a historical model of the current situation in the example of Latin as the international language of the western world in the early middle ages. Beginning as a link between isolated monasteries, Latin became an international medium for the exchange of ideas down the centuries through such humble works as Agricola's De Re Metallica and beyond. In the 17th century, Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton published their ideas in Latin. In the 18th century all of Carl Linnaeus' major works were published in Latin. Latin, as the international linguistic precursor of English, carried much the same broad burden of technological and scientific (and early on, commercial) information that English does today.

English, beginning as the language of those whose ancestors lost at the Battle of Hastings, has risen in prominence, not only through the influence of Shakespeare's plays and the King James Bible. For the last 200 years, the U.S. Constitution has drawn the attention of the world too. Even more significant, the British involvement in the world wars of the 18th and 19th

centuries and the British and American involvement in major wars of the 20th century have sent native speakers of English everywhere. The predatory commercialism of those conflicts is reflected in the fact that wherever English speaking troops were sent, there too you would inevitably find English speaking traders.

The direct academic descendent of this situation is the growing field of ESP (English for Special Purposes). Speakers of several different languages find common business, scientific, or political ground in international English. Thus careers are multiplying for English majors who can work at developing the English fluency of foreign nationals (Kral,1).

So the third reason that the English of Business is our concern is more urgent than historical origins or past breadth of practice. Today, as victims (or beneficiaries) of our own success in spreading English, Anglophone countries face serious questions about cultural imperialism. Those questions are just as pressing as the questions arising from the unrelenting pressure exerted by English speaking majorities on minorities. In response to majority speaker pressure, we have come to respect the integrity of various discourse communities, including even those pragmatically created in Scientific, Technical, and Business writing. Everywhere you look there are subtle differences in the Writing Process and the sense of audience. No less than in all those richly varied studies of how different cultures write, the English of Business raises both serious questions and challenging opportunities that require our attention as we consider how to conduct our academic affairs and our business in the world of the 21st century (Allen 1; Newman 1).

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